

## INSECTS AND WITCHCRAFT

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“It is one of the obligations that witches owe to the devil that, when they assemble at the Sabbat, they must show that they have wrought some fresh evil since the last meeting; and if they cannot do so they escape with impunity. And that they may not be able to plead ignorance as an excuse, their evil Master instructs them in all those activities which he demands from them: as in infesting the trees and fruits with locusts, caterpillars, slugs, butterflies, canker-worms, and such pestilent vermin which devour everything, seeds, leaves and fruit; or in bewitching cattle; or in casting a spell on the crops so that they are destroyed by leeches or wasted in some other way; or in the use of poisons, and in working as far as in them lies for the destruction of the whole human race. For all this we know from their own confessions.” So wrote Brother Francesco Mario Guazzo in 1608 in chapter VIII of his “Compendium Maleficarum.”

This little paper is not concerned with black magic as such, but rather with the relatively unimportant part which insects played in witchcraft and more particularly with their use as familiars or demons in the shape of animals, by means of which spirits, the witch was served in carrying out her nefarious plans. Kittredge has stated, “that the essential element in black witchcraft is *maleficium*—the working of harm to the bodies and goods of one’s neighbors by means of evil spirits or of strange powers derived from intercourse with such spirits. This belief in *maleficium* was once universal; it was rooted and grounded in the minds of all European people before they became Christian; it is still the creed of most savages and of millions of so-called civilized men.”

Beelzebub, or the lord of flies, was an ancient deity worshipped under the form of a fly. Aelian (*de Natura Animalium*) states that during a festival in honor of Apollo, an oxen was sacrificed

to flies, and Pliny mentions a divinity as being invoked for relief from their annoying visits. Dalyell, in his "Darker Superstitions of Scotland," wrote that a "tutelary fly, believed immortal, presided over a fountain in the county of Banff and here also a large blue fly, resting on the bark of trees, was distinguished as a witch." In northern mythology, Loki, the spirit of evil, is said to have metamorphosed himself into a fly and fiends in the shape of flies were kept in captivity by the Finlanders, to be released against men and beasts. Dalyell relates also that when the Archbishop of St. Andrews was murdered in 1679, "upon the opening of his tobacco box a living humming bee flew out," which was thought to be his familiar or devil. During the trial of Isobell Elliot, Marion Veitch and others, September 13, 1678, "a woman declared that a child was poisoned by its grandmother, who, together with herself, were 'in the shape of bumblebees,'—that the former carried the poison 'in her cleuchs, wings, and mouth.'" Dalyell cites other instances of black beetles being considered as metamorphosed devils, comparing this belief in Scotland with that of the ancients, as recorded by Pliny, in associating nocturnal moths fluttering around their lamps, with an evil presence. He believed that the modern superstitions regarding demoniac insects were perhaps derived from the stories of Jewish history, as literally accepted (Exodus, Chap. XXIII, V. 28; Wisdom of Solomon, Chap. XV, V. 8; Deuteronomy, Chap. VII, V. 20; Joshua, Chap. XXIV, V. 12).

According to Karsten, the spirits and demons of the South American Indians sometimes assume the shapes of insects. Among the Araucanians, horse-flies are regarded as spirits from the shade-land. If such insects enter a village where some one is sick, the Indians begin to wail as if death had already occurred, saying that "the horse-flies are the souls of their dead relatives who are coming to fetch him away." The appearance of these insects at their drinking bouts indicates that their dead kinsmen are taking part in the feast, and it is believed that chiefs especially transform themselves into horse-flies and remain in this shape in the grass, emerging sometimes to visit their relations. Among the Jibaros and Canelos Indians, certain venomous insects are regarded as demons and the Canelos pay particu-

lar attention to the "black wasp" and the "great black ant," the poisonous stings of which are thought to resemble the magical arrows of the sorcerers.

Winstedt, writing of Malay magic, says that a class of familiar spirits is created from the dead, the best known of these taking the shape of a house-cricket. A woman enters the forest on the night previous to a full moon and with her back to the moon and her face to an ant hill, recites a charm and tries to capture her own shadow. This may require three nights or she may have to try for several months always on the same three nights. Finally she succeeds and never again will her body cast a shadow. Then in the night a child will appear before her and put out its tongue. She seizes the tongue, the child's body vanishes and the tongue transforms into a tiny animal, reptile, or insect which may be used as a bottle imp. Another version is that a tongue to change into such an imp "must be bitten out of the exhumed corpse of the first born child of a first born mother and buried at cross roads." Such vampire crickets are employed by jealous wives to work harm to their rivals or to their rivals' children. Bottle imps are kept in closed bamboo vessels and fed with milk and ant's eggs. When released, a bottle imp will cause sickness, delirium, etc., especially to children, the best known of such imps taking the form of house-crickets.

Kittredge, in his recent work "Witchcraft in Old and New England," cites many instances of demons in the shape of insects, serving the witch as familiar spirits. He writes that "among the Bakongo, insects trapped by the doctor are witches who have caused disease: if the insect is hurt, the witch suffers." When John Steward of Knaresborough (Yorkshire) was tried for sorcery in the Archbishop's Court in 1510, one of the witnesses testified that he had been told by a Sir Thomas Spurret, "that he sawe Steward have iii humble bees, or like humble bees, and kepte theyme undir a stone in the erth, and called theyme oute by oone and oone, and gave iche oone of theyme a drop of blode of his fyngor."

According to the "Depositions from the Castle of York relating to offences committed in the Northern Counties in the seventeenth century" (Surtees Society, vol. XL, p. 67, London,

1861), John Greencliffe of Beverley, on October 14, 1654, said "that on Saturday last, about seaven in the evening, Elizabeth Roberts did appeare to him in her usuall wearing clothes, with a ruff about her neck, and, presently vanishing, turned herself into the similitude of a catt, which fixed close about his leg, and, after much struggling, vanished; whereupon he was much pained in his heart. Upon Wednesday there seized a catt upon his body, which did strike him on the head, upon which he fell into a swound or traunce. After he received the blow, he saw the said Elizabeth escape upon a wall in her usuall wearing apparell. Upon Thursday she appeared unto him in the likeness of a bee, which did very much afflict him, to witt, in throwing of his body from place to place notwithstanding there were five or six persons to hold him downe." All of which Elizabeth Roberts denied.

Cotton Mather, in "The Wonders of the Invisible World" (1639), wrote that at the trial of Rose Cullender and Amy Duny in New England, Margaret Arnold testified,—“At another time, a thing like a Bee, flew at the Face of the younger Child; the Child fell into a Fit; and at last Vomited up a Two-penny Nail with a Broad Head; affirming, That the Bee brought this Nail, and forced it into her Mouth. The Child would in like manner be assaulted with Flies, which brought Crooked Pins unto her, and made her first swallow them, and then Vomit them.” During the same trial, Robert Sherringham testified among other things that while driving past Rose Cullender's house, “He was also taken with a Lameness in his Limbs; and so vexed with Lice of an extraordinary Number and Bigness, that no Art could hinder the Swarming of them, till he burnt up two Suits of Apparel.”

Guazzo, in his "Compendium Maleficarum," discussing whether witches could create living things, wrote,—“It is the opinion of S. Augustine (*De Trinitate*, III, 7) supported by all other Theologians, particularly S. Thomas and S. Bonaventura, that witches can in a moment produce imperfect animals, such as flies, worms, frogs and such insects and other animals which are generated by putrefaction; not by creating them, but by applying active to passive principles. It is usually the

demon who, in accordance with his pact with the witch, produces such animals by the application of active to passive forces: for the witches themselves for the most part do not know how they are produced, and are ignorant of the causes: as when the devil gives a witch a little dust which she throws into the air, and there are born various kinds of locusts and grasshoppers and mice and caterpillars and suchlike animals. The devil could also, having produced such things, tend them and nourish them and give them breath in remote places where they appear to be generated; as among rocks, where imperfect animals are often born, such as flies and mice and similar things."

In another place, Guazzo, speaking of the tenacious grip which the devil keeps upon those in his power, said,—“Among many other women condemned to the fire for witchcraft, whose names I do not now remember, when Claude Simonette and her son were led into prison it was observed that a demon in the form of a fly buzzed round their temples and repeatedly warned them not to lay their crimes bare by confession even under stress of the direst torture: for if they confessed, it was most certain that they would be condemned to the most terrible death; whereas if they held their tongues they would shortly escape safe and unharmed.”

In “Witch Hunting and Witch Trials,” by C. L’Estrange Ewen, which includes abstracts of the indictments for witchcraft in England from 1559 to 1736, the following references to insects may be found.

“Joan Wayte of Grt. Barneston, spinster, wife of Robert W. of B., labourer, on 29 Aug., 1650, at Audleyend, did entertain, employ, and feed an evil spirit called a butterfly.”

And among various seventeenth century depositions occur the following:

“Alicia Warner de Rushmere ffrely beeinge at her liberty confessed that she had entertained certeine euill sperits w<sup>ch</sup> had succed her and that she employed them to carry lice to one Wrights wife and to one barnies and the s<sup>d</sup>. weamen weare lousie according as she confessed.”

“Susanna Smith de Rushmere . . . confessed that the diuill did againe appeare to her in likenes of a black bee and told her



that she should be attached the next day and that if she confessed any thing she should die for it. . . .”

In accordance with the published rules for the discovery of witches, insects sometimes furnished a part of the evidence. John Gaul in his “Select Cases of Conscience touching Witches and Witchcrafts” (1646) gives some particulars of the method utilized by one Hopkins, a witch-finder.

“Having taken the suspected witch, she is placed in the middle of a room upon a stool or table, cross-legged, or in some other uneasy posture, to which if she submits not, she is then bound with cords; there is she watched and kept without meat or sleep for the space of 24 hours for (they say) within that time they shall see her imp come and suck. A little hole is likewise made in the door for the imp to come in at; and lest it might come in some less discernible shape, they that watch are taught to be ever and anon sweeping the room, and if they see any spiders or flies, to kill them. And if they cannot kill them, then they may be sure they are her imps.”

Many other references to insects of a demonic nature may be found in the literature of witchcraft. Kittredge states that flies of such kind are frequently mentioned in Germanic lore and that they are familiar to Lappish, Finnish and Norse sorcery. Of course, insects were not the most popular of animal familiars and they were greatly outnumbered by cats, dogs, toads, rats, ferrets, birds, mice, rabbits, etc.

From the middle of the thirteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth centuries such beliefs as are indicated above were a part of the times, and it was no more improper to hold such views then than it is now to believe in mediums, fortune tellers and other forms of present day quackery. Yesterday, we hanged witches. Today, we pay them consultation fees. *O tempora! O mores!*

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